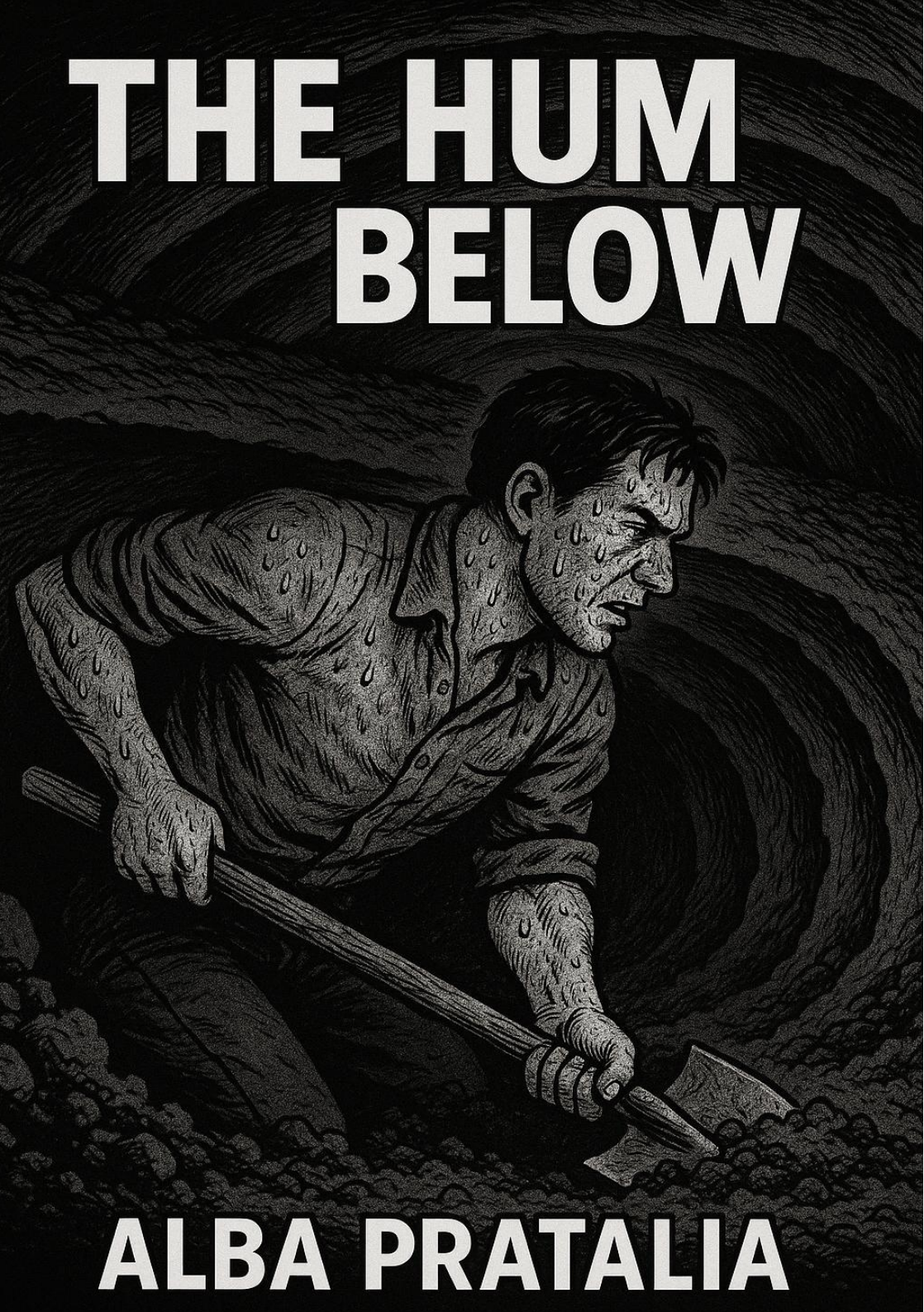
THE HUM BELOW



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He dug with a rusted spade. The earth was cold, damp, packed tight as bone. He pressed his shoulder against the wall to breathe. The air smelled of rust and mold. A small lantern flickered, spitting yellow light. He moved again, cutting the soil in thin slabs. Each breath dragged through his throat like sandpaper. The tunnel was narrow, barely wide enough for him to turn. Behind him, the hole to the surface was gone. It had filled itself back with the same dirt he had removed. He didn't look back. He pushed forward, arm, arm, leg, leg. The earth swallowed sound. Only the scrape of metal. And the breathing. His own or something else's, he couldn't tell.He woke up lying on his side, mouth full of grit. The lantern had gone out. He felt the weight above him, the low ceiling pressing. He couldn't tell if he was deeper or if the ground had sunk over him. He scraped at the dirt until his fingers bled. The tunnel

was tighter now, ribs brushing the walls with each crawl. His shovel was gone. Maybe buried, maybe left behind. He clawed forward. The smell was different—sweet rot, wet fur. Something brushed his arm and slid away. He froze, listening. Small feet moved in the dark, skittering, circling. He reached out and touched something warm, slick. It twitched. He flinched, hit his head on the roof, tasted blood. Then silence again. Just his heart punching slow, hard beats against the earth.He dug with his hands now. The soil was looser, moist, clumping between his fingers. Each pull brought worms to the surface, twisting, blindingly alive in the dark. One slid over his wrist, cold and soft. He kept moving. The air thinned. His lungs drew less each time. He stopped thinking about how far he'd gone. Distance didn't matter underground. He paused, pressed his ear against the dirt. Heard something distant—like breathing, like water. He moved toward it. The tunnel dipped slightly. The sound grew louder, a low murmur under the ground. His palms slid in mud. Then a drop hit his cheek. Another. The first thread

of water ran down the wall, tracing the line of his arm. He looked up into darkness that wasn't empty anymore.The water kept coming, thin at first, then steady. It ran along the floor, filling footprints and hand marks. He crawled higher, but the tunnel sloped down again. The lantern sputtered, caught once, then went out. He felt for the wall, rough and close. The sound of dripping grew faster. He dug upward, desperate, hitting stone. Hard. Unmoving. He pressed his ear to it—solid, humming faintly. The earth around him began to tremble. Pebbles rolled. The ceiling shed dust onto his hair. He closed his eyes though there was no light to close them against. A crack opened somewhere behind him, deep and slow like a sigh. Air shifted. Cold, new, breathing from below. He turned toward it, crawling backward through the wet soil. The air from the crack was sharp, metallic. He followed it. The ground narrowed, squeezing his shoulders. His shirt tore against a rock edge. He pushed through, exhaling to fit. The crack widened after a while, enough for his body to slide down. He let himself fall. The drop

wasn't far, but the landing knocked the wind out of him. He stayed still. The earth around was different—gravel, shards, old smell of smoke. He reached out. His hand touched metal, corroded and cold. Pipes. He followed one with his fingers until it vanished into a wall of clay. A faint vibration pulsed through it, regular, alive. He pressed his ear to it and heard something faint—movement, or voices, or just the echo of his own pulse trapped in steel. He stayed with the pipe a long time. The rhythm steadied him, gave the dark a pattern. Then it stopped. Just like that. He waited, listening for it to start again. Nothing. The silence after it was heavier than before. He pushed on, hand to the wall, dragging his body through mud and broken stones. The air had gone stale again, every breath slower, harder. He found a patch of softer soil and began digging upward. The dirt collapsed back into his face. He spat, wiped, tried again. His nails tore. The earth didn't care. Somewhere to his left, something moved. Not small. Slow. He froze. The sound came closer—wet dragging, like something heavy crawling with its

belly. He didn't move. The thing stopped too. Then a hiss, long, patient. He couldn't tell if it was behind the wall or inside it. He pressed his hand flat to the wall. It was warm. The hiss came again, closer now, and the wall trembled under his palm. He pulled back. The soil bulged outward, swelling, cracking. A thin line split open and something pale pushed through—soft, glistening, alive. He kicked at it, scraping backward, boots slipping in the mud. The thing slid further out, thick as his arm, tapering to nothing. It recoiled at his touch, then struck again, fast, silent. He caught it mid-air, twisted, felt it writhe in his grip. The body pulsed once, twice, then went still. He threw it aside. It landed with a sound like wet cloth. He waited. No movement. He didn't want to touch it again, but he had to know the path forward. He crawled over it, careful, and felt the floor slope down into a new hollow. The air there smelled less of rot. Slightly cooler. He followed it. The passage widened. He could crouch again, stretch his back. The floor was smoother here, packed hard by something that had moved through often. He found

marks in the dirt—grooves, scratches, prints too big to be from rats. He ran his hand over them. Deep. Old. The lantern, now only a memory, had left him blind, but the dark had its own shape. He could feel it breathing around him. The ground under his knees changed again—stones laid in pattern, straight lines under the grime. Man-made. He brushed the dirt away. Tiles. Broken but deliberate. He followed the line, tracing it with his fingers, until the tunnel opened into space. He waved a hand in front of him and met nothing. He tossed a rock. It took three heartbeats to land. The sound was swallowed before it finished. He lay flat at the edge, feeling the void breathe cold against his face. The air here moved, slow and deep, like lungs beneath the ground. He stretched an arm out, groping for a wall, a ledge, anything solid. Nothing. Just air and the faint echo of his own movement. He pulled a thread from his torn shirt, let it fall. It vanished soundless. He spat next. Same. No return. He took a stone, tied it with his belt, and lowered it. The belt went slack long before the stone hit bottom. He pulled it back, damp, cold as

iron. Water, maybe. Or not. He sat back on his heels. His breath clouded in front of him, even in the dark. The tunnel behind him gave a single small sound—dirt shifting, slow, careful, like something testing the air. He turned his head, still crouched, holding his breath. The sound came again, closer. Not the slither of the worm or the scurry of rats. He felt it in the ground first, a dull tremor with each step. He backed toward the edge, palms sliding on cold tile. The air grew thick with dust, dry and choking. A faint glimmer broke the dark—two dull reflections, low to the ground, unmoving. Eyes, maybe. Then gone. He waited, pulse in his ears. The silence folded back over him, deeper than before. He exhaled, too loud. The floor cracked under his hand. One tile dropped, clinking against stone, then another, and another. The edge crumbled. He grabbed for the wall, missed. The earth gave way, swallowing him whole. He fell through black air that felt like water. The descent was long enough to think it might never end, then sudden. He hit something soft, then hard, bounced once, rolled, stopped. The pain came slow. His ribs

ached with every breath. The air was wet, heavy, smelled of rust and still water. He reached out, touched the ground—mud again, mixed with grit. He lifted his head. The faint shimmer from above was gone. He could hear the slow lap of water somewhere ahead. He crawled toward it, dragging one leg that wouldn't bend. The mud thickened until his hands slipped under. His fingers broke the surface of something colder, smoother. Water. He leaned in and drank. It tasted of metal and rot. When he pulled away, something else moved in it—ripples spreading, quiet, deliberate. He stayed still, listening. The ripples reached the shore and faded. The water calmed, then stirred again from deeper in. A shape brushed the surface, faint, soundless. He crawled backward, hand on the ground, keeping low. The air had no direction, no hint of where the walls were. The sound came again—sliding, slow, circling him. He picked a rock, held it ready. Nothing happened. He waited. Then a splash, heavy, sudden, close enough to wet his face. He threw the rock blindly. The noise stopped. His breath fogged the air. The

silence that followed pressed in until he could hear his heartbeat knocking against his chest. He moved again, faster now, away from the water. His hand hit wood. Smooth. Carved. He traced the edge—planks joined, bound by metal bands. A crate, or a door. He pushed. It didn't move. He pushed harder. It opened. The hinge moaned once, long and hollow. Air spilled out, colder than before, carrying a smell of oil and dust. He slipped through, dragging his leg. The ground changed again, from mud to stone, smooth and dry. His fingers found marks carved shallow into the wall—lines, curves, nothing he could read. The passage was narrower, but higher. He could stand, half-bent. He walked. The echo of his steps followed close, too close, as if the dark were walking with him. He touched the wall to stay steady. The carvings grew deeper, then sharper. Fingernail marks. He kept going. Ahead, the air grew warmer, softer. He stopped. There was light, faint, a sickly yellow pulse that blinked once every few seconds. It came from around a corner. He wiped his face with a torn sleeve and turned toward it. He stepped into the glow. It

came from a bulb hanging on a wire that ran up into the rock. The light buzzed, weak, steady between flickers. Around him, the tunnel was lined with brick, soaked dark with age. Rusted tools leaned against the wall—a hammer, a bent shovel, a metal pail half full of water gone black. He picked it up. The surface rippled though nothing touched it. The floor slanted downward again, into a new shaft, narrower but smoother, the walls showing scrape marks all the way along. He followed them with his hand. The brick turned to stone again. The hum of the wire faded until there was only his breath and the soft drag of his boot through mud. Then a sound—short, metallic—echoed ahead, once, like something had dropped and waited to be heard. He froze. The sound didn't repeat. He crouched low, hand still on the wall. The silence that followed was sharp, thin enough to cut. He waited. Nothing. He took a slow step forward, dragging his foot to feel the ground. Another step. Then the sound again—closer, clear this time. A small clang, metal on stone, deliberate. He reached down, found a chain half-buried in the mud. It was

warm. He pulled. It didn't move. The chain led into the wall, vanishing between stones slick with moisture. He gave it another tug. The floor shifted under him, a low groan rising through the ground. Dust fell from the ceiling in slow rain. The wall ahead split along a line he hadn't seen, stone sliding on stone. A gap opened, wide enough for him to pass. The air beyond smelled like old smoke and iron. He stepped through. The ground on the other side was solid, dry, coated in fine dust that clung to his hands. The space was wide, too wide to see the walls. His steps echoed this time, not swallowed but sent back, fractured and late. He moved forward, slower now, sweeping the air in front of him with one arm. The echo changed, broke against something tall. He reached out. Wood again, smoother than the last door, almost polished. He followed it upward until his fingers met cold metal. A latch. He tried it. It gave without sound. The door opened inward on its own weight, pulling air with it. The smell that came out was old paper, sweat, oil. He stepped in and the floor creaked—real wood now, laid and level. He could feel

the pattern of boards beneath his feet. The dark was thinner here, more honest. Somewhere far off, something ticked. He followed the ticking. It came steady, patient, unhurried. The air was warmer, close with the weight of things long shut away. His eyes began to catch shapes—angles, shadows stacked on shadows. Furniture. A table. Shelves. He reached one, touched glass. A jar. Another beside it. Inside, pale things floated in cloudy fluid—worms, lizards, a hand small as a child's. He kept walking. The ticking grew louder. At the far wall, a clock stood tall, face cracked, pendulum still moving. The second hand twitched, paused, moved again. The sound was wrong—half a beat late. He put his ear against it. There was something behind the clock, faint and hollow, like the echo of a voice trapped under wood. He pressed harder. The clock stopped. The silence after the stop was sudden and complete. He waited, cheek still against the glass, listening for it to start again. It didn't. Instead, a soft thud sounded behind the clock, followed by a long drag, like something being pulled across the floor. He stepped back, hand

on the wall. The sound came closer, slow but certain, until it stopped right where he stood. He reached out and felt only air. Then a breath—short, sharp, not his. He swung his arm. Nothing. He backed away, heel catching on a board. The floor gave under him, a hollow space below. He crouched, ran his hand along the crack. It was square. A trapdoor. He pried it open with his fingers, the hinges breaking loose with a sigh. Warm air rose from below, carrying the smell of soil and rust. He hesitated, then climbed down. The ladder was rough, nailed together from splintered planks. Each rung creaked under his weight. He counted twelve before his boot met ground again. The air was thick, still warm, but different—closer, breathing against him. He turned slowly, hand brushing the wall. It was dirt again, packed smooth, but threaded with roots that twitched when he touched them. A faint light bled through from somewhere, not white, not yellow—dull red, pulsing faintly like a slow heartbeat. He walked toward it. The floor sucked at his boots, wet and sticky. The tunnel here was circular, smooth as if

carved by water or something with patience. The red glow grew stronger. It came from a crack ahead, running vertical through the wall. He peered in. Behind it, something moved. Something vast. It shifted slowly, like the turn of a tide. The red glow deepened with each movement, flooding the tunnel in dull light. He stepped back, but the crack widened with a groan, spilling warm air that smelled of metal and old blood. The wall pulsed. Not stone. Flesh. He pressed a hand against it—soft, damp, alive. A faint tremor passed through it, like a breath under skin. He pulled his hand away. The wall flexed, following the motion, reaching. He stumbled back, slipping in the mud. The glow flickered, dimmed, then flared again, brighter now, throbbing in rhythm with the ground itself. He ran. The tunnel shook behind him, the red light chasing him in waves. He turned a corner blindly, hit a low ceiling, fell. The earth closed around him, trembling with the sound of something waking. He lay still, ears full of the noise. The tremor built until the tunnel seemed to breathe around him. Dust fell in soft curtains. The red glow seeped through the

cracks, chasing the shape of his body in the dirt. He crawled away from it, scraping elbows raw. The air thickened, hot and wet, pushing against his face. Behind him, the wall split with a sound like tearing hide. He didn't look back. He pushed forward through the collapsing soil, dragging his leg, half blind. The tunnel narrowed until it cut his shoulders. He kept going, clawing upward where the slope steepened. The heat faded slowly. The glow dimmed. When he stopped to breathe, all that was left was the steady drip of water somewhere ahead, falling in slow, careful rhythm, as if counting for him. He followed the dripping. Each sound a step, each pause a breath. The tunnel curved left, then right, tighter, the ceiling low again. His back brushed stone slick with condensation. The ground turned to silt. Cold water reached his wrists as he crawled. It deepened fast. He waded, dragging his dead leg behind. The dripping became a trickle, then a stream. He dipped his hand into it, drank. The taste was clean, sharp. He filled his lungs, felt lighter. The tunnel sloped upward. The water thinned again to puddles. He

reached a rise and pulled himself onto dry ground. Ahead, a faint draft. Real air. He could smell it—grass, dust, maybe rain. He moved faster. The tunnel ended in a wall of roots, thick and tangled. He pushed his fingers through, ripping them apart. Light spilled through the gaps. Pale, almost white. He tore the roots apart with his bare hands. They snapped, oozing sap that smelled like iron. The light behind them grew wider, blinding after the dark. He forced a gap big enough to crawl through and pushed his head out. Air hit him—cold, clean, alive. He dragged his body up, chest scraping bark and stone. His eyes watered. He squinted. The world above was gray, endless. Rain fell in thin, slanted lines. He lay half in, half out, breathing in the sky. The hole behind him steamed faintly, exhaling warmth from the deep. He rolled onto his back. The clouds moved fast, low, heavy. No sound but rain on dirt. He looked around. No houses. No trees. Just flat ground stretching forever, marked only by the dark circle of the hole he had made. He stood, slow, knees trembling. The rain washed mud from his skin, turning small rivers down

his arms. The ground was soft, pitted, lifeless. No grass. No sound of wind, birds, engines. He turned in a slow circle. The horizon was a straight line, sharp as a blade, unbroken in any direction. The sky and the ground were the same color. He walked a few steps. The earth sank under his boots, hollow beneath the surface. He crouched, pressed his ear to it. The faint hum was still there—deep, steady, the same pulse that had followed him underground. He sat back, staring at the hole. The steam had stopped. The light had gone. The air smelled of nothing at all.He stared at the horizon until his eyes blurred. The sound under the ground grew louder, steady, constant, the same rhythm as his pulse. He turned away from it, took one step, then another. The soil cracked behind him. He stopped. The hole shuddered once, then caved in, swallowing itself. The hum stopped. The silence was final. He looked down at his hands. The dirt was clean.